Years ago, Carol told me about the only time her mother ever physically punished her. Ms. Edna McLean slapped her little girl’s face. It seems the very young Carol had been told NO several times, but ignored the command repeatedly and continued to assert her own agenda. The breaking point came when the sweet little thing turned her stubborn face to Mom, stamped her foot, and hollered:

“No means yes, and yes means no!”

Isn’t that where we are today—I mean, in our society? It is hard for me to consider any area of this culture’s moral environment and not find it turned upside-down. What once was No, is now a Yes. And what, only a short generation ago, was Yes … has now become strictly verboten. (For example, try asserting any tenet of ordinary traditional ethics, and hear the howls of: Extremist!)

• We have heard for millennia, “Do NO Murder.” It is a horror in the human race. Yet now, we aggressively market video games to our youth that teach nothing but the pure joy and fun of killing. (And this from Hollywood, a place that is strictly anti-gun.) Here’s an example from yesterday …

TYLER, October 22, 2014— It’s a well-known fact that zombies eat brains. Where do you find the best brains? At the Tyler Public Library, of course. … Anyone looking to try their luck as a zombie hunter is invited to the first ever Zombie Shootout on Saturday, Oct. 25, from 6 to 7 p.m., at the Tyler Public Library, 201 S. College Ave.

Hunters armed with Nerf guns will have six shots in the first round to hit as many zombies as possible. … However if a zombie successfully tags the hunter, then the hunter becomes one of the walking dead.

“This is a fun event to bring people into the Library and support our children’s programming,” said Access Librarian Lori Fregoso. “Open to all ages.”

• We have known that, it is good to teach Virtue to our youth: Honor, Integrity, Character. But we insist on teaching the opposite. … I went to a high school basketball game and actually listened to the lyrics of the music blaring in the gym during the warm-ups. I realized that I would NOT be able to take my mother to a high-school basketball game.

From the beginning of the human race, human beings have approached God as if He were judge and Lord, and they were unworthy, and they would come with a certain guilt at wrongdoing, and plead for Mercy.

Now, as C.S. Lewis put it decades ago: In our modern day, God is in the Dock—in the witness stand—and we are the judge; God must now defend himself and his narrow-minded strictures!

No means Yes, and Yes means No. … I will NOT obey.

Now, we see Moses—and we realize it can happen to the Best of the Best: The “No” of disobedience. And Moses was indeed the epitome of a HERO of character and courage and virtue and accomplishment and intimacy with his God. Our Scripture today says …

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequaled … for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

And God said to this Mighty Man … “NO! You shall not enter the Land! You have led the people there, but you must stay out. You have strived for 40 years in the wilderness, and now you arrive, and you are barred, barricaded, and bereft of the joy you longed for. Moses: No!

“I will give it to your descendants,” says the Lord. “I have let you see it with your eyes, Moses, but you shall not cross over there.”

WHY? ANSWER: One unacceptable act of Disobedience.

The people had complained that they were thirsty, and Moses got angry. He was commanded to speak to the rock, and it water would flow with fresh water. Moses said, NO, I’ve got my own plan. Instead, Moses struck the rock with his staff.

Imagine the heartache of Moses as he stood looking at the Promised Land from a high mountain, knowing his disobedience had caused such personal pain—and the pain of others for their Leader.

Moses says: “At that time I pleaded with the Lord: 24 ‘Sovereign Lord, … Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan—that fine hill country and Lebanon.’

“That is enough,” the Lord said. “Do not speak to me anymore about this matter.”

The sad truth of this for us humans is: No matter who I am, when the rules don’t apply to me … I’m capable of anything.

OVER …
But you say, “Gary, obedience is a very old-fashioned word, really, a totally out-dated concept.”
Yes, it’s certainly gone out of style. Why? Because it is seen as a removal of human freedom. It is a block to my happiness, a barrier to my joy.
But is it destructive of freedom? Or does it actually, ultimately, preserve freedom … and save us from self-destruction?

• The late Presbyterian preacher Ben Haden told about a tragic case of freedom and destruction that appeared in the newspapers in 1997 …

“It was a Friday night, and a 21 year old woman and two 20 year old men were in a pick up truck. That night, they admit: to taking down 19 stop signs in Hillsborough county Florida, roughly 20 miles east of Tampa.

“And several days later, at an intersection where there was no stop sign, because it had been removed, three 18 year old boys having finished bowling for the evening, went barreling through this intersection and were hit broadside by an 8 ton truck. All three were killed.

“The judge, Bob Mitchum, who is known as a harsh judge (ie, he observes the law and takes it seriously) said: ‘This was the most difficult case of my life. … “I’ve cried and I’ve been sleepless, but the jury has found that these three defendants did in fact remove the stop signs, and cause the death of three 18 year old boys. And the recommendation is that I sentence them to 50 years. Instead, I’m sentencing them to 30 years, with 15 years probation. They will be eligible for parole in roughly 13 years.’ And there were tears all around the courtroom.”

A missing stop sign. The Associate Press called it a “prank.” You say, “What a tragedy!” Yet, how descriptive that is of our lives today.

QUESTION: What are the stop signs in your life, and mine? -- What are the STOP signs that might have been removed-- and maybe need to go back up? I can’t answer for you, because, after all, I have my own struggles with No and Yes and Stop and Go. I struggle with Obedience and Disobedience.

But why is it that when God calls us to obedience we may hear it not as a call to save our selves from self-destruction (the simple definition of sin) but only as a wet blanket thrown on our full enjoyment of life?

Could it be … No boundaries, no safety? … No STOP, no GO either?

It’s so interesting to me that in Frederick Buechner’s book, Wishful Thinking, which is a dictionary of various theological terms, he lists under the entry for OBEDIENCE, this: (see “Freedom”). Isn’t that intriguing?

FREEDOM: “We have freedom to the degree that the master whom we obey grants it to us in return for our obedience. For example …

To obey our strongest appetites for drink, sex, power, revenge, or whatever, leaves us the freedom of an animal to take what we want when we want it, but not the freedom of a human being to be human.

The old prayer speaks of God “in whose service is perfect freedom.” It means that to obey Love himself, who above all else wishes us well, leaves us the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become.”

Maybe the Freedom part of God’s commands comes from the fact that those commandments can be read, not as harsh demands, but as promises. He says, “Don’t worry about money.” But the unwritten promise is, “I will provide for your needs. I will make it possible for you to relax and trust me.”

Wherever I read “You shall …” or “You shall not …,” I can also read, “You can …

You see, with God, every NO has an implied YES. … Every No, is a call to a little more freedom. Thus: All the promises of God are … YES in Christ. Freedom in obedience!

Listen to the Apostle Paul writing to a congregation of Christians, people like you and me …

“Brothers and sisters, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us … was not ‘Yes’ and ‘No,’ but in him it has always been ‘Yes.’ For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.”

In Christ, yes, yes, yes! Freedom! Rebellion redeemed! Self-destruction destroyed! Sin swallowed in victory! Bottomline: If there were never a No, there could never be a Yes. Or, as Bishop Sheen once said: “If we had never sinned, we could never call Christ … SAVIOR.”

FOR YOUR TABLE DISCUSSION …

1. In your opinion, is the topic of sin and disobedience too “old fashioned” for today’s pulpit? Talk about it!
2. What part of this sermon spoke to you most powerfully? Tell why!
3. What questions or insights did this sermon raise in your mind?
4. Where did you AGREE … or DISAGREE with the preacher today?
5. Was this sermon negative … or, in some way, hopeful?